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North Korean Aesthetics within a Colonial Urban Form: Monuments to Independence and Democracy in Windhoek, Namibia

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Abstract

This paper examines two high-profile commemorative spaces in Namibia's national capital, Windhoek, designed and constructed by North Korean state-owned enterprise Mansudae Overseas Projects. These commemorative projects illustrate the complex and evolving intersections between public art, architecture and urban form in this post-colonial context. They show how sites designed around heritage and collective identity intersect with urban space's physical development and everyday use. The projects also illustrate the intersecting histories of three aesthetic lineages: German, South African and North Korean. This paper will show how these commemorative spaces embody North Korean urban space ideas while also developing new national symbols, historical narratives and identities within Windhoek's urban landscape as part of independent Namibia's nation-building. The monument's 'Socialist Realist' aesthetic signals a conscious departure from the colonial and apartheid eras by the now-independent Namibian government.

This paper extends prior research focused on the symbolism of Mansudae's monumental schemes by analysing these monuments' design, placement, public reception and use within Windhoek as they relate to the city's overall development since Namibia's independence in 1990. By documenting the form, location and decision-making processes for the Mansudae-designed memorials in Windhoek and historical changes in their spatial and political context, the paper explores the interaction between North Korean political ideology and design approaches and Namibia's democratic ambitions for city-making. The paper's mapping analysis spatially compares the sculptural, architectural and urban design strategies of Mansudae's additions to Windhoek's City Crown (2010-14) to

Pyongyang's Mansu Hill Grand Monument (1972-2011), and Windhoek's Heroes' Acre (2002) to Mansudae's earlier National Martyrs Cemetery outside Pyongyang (1975-85).

Introduction

Independent Namibia has embarked on the project of nation-building in its capital, Windhoek, through the construction of several monumental projects. These memorial spaces, designed and constructed by North Korean Mansudae Overseas Projects in their signature Socialist Realist aesthetic, are a deliberate and conspicuous departure from the surrounding urban fabric and its colonial and apartheid landmarks. This paper examines how these North Korean aesthetics and ideas about urban form have been translated and deployed to rewrite national history in Windhoek's post-colonial urban and political context. The paper presents an original mapping analysis to compare the sculptural, architectural and urban design strategies of Mansudae's additions to Windhoek's City Crown (2010-14) to Pyongyang's Mansu Hill Grand Monument (1972-2011), and Windhoek's Heroes' Acre (2002) to Mansudae's earlier National Martyrs Cemetery outside Pyongyang (1975-85).

North Korea and Africa

After World War II, the African continent was swept by a wave of decolonisation as territories agitated for independence from their European colonisers. Ghana was the first African nation to obtain independence in 1957, and Namibia, entangled in South Africa's anti-apartheid struggle, was the most recent in 1990. During this time, the Cold War saw the Soviet Union and the United States manoeuvre to exert their political, economic and ideological influences in Africa, frequently delaying or subverting African nations' independence in their attempts to seed Soviet socialism or American democracy.

After World War II, numerous African nations developed ideological alliances with North Korea. The Japanese occupation of Korea ended in 1945, and the United States and the Soviet Union divided the country. Reunification of the Korean peninsula failed, and in 1948 the North and South formed separate governments. In the south, the Republic of Korea was supported by the Western allies, with Seoul as its capital. The northern Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), with Pyongyang as its capital, was supported by the Soviet bloc. With the help of the Soviet Union, Kim Il

Sung, returning from exile, became the leader of the Democratic People's Republic and led the North Korean invasion of South Korea from 1950 to 1953. The Korean Armistice Agreement of 1953 ended overt hostilities between North and South while reinforcing Korea's division by creating a new demilitarised border zone.

Kim Il Sung promoted North Korea as an anti-imperialist stalwart to Africa's emerging leaders, presenting the Juche ideology of self-reliance, self-sufficiency and self-defence, and supplying African liberation movements with arms, military advisers and ammunition.¹ The DPRK's image as an agent of global anti-colonialism, defying the West despite its small size and limited economic power, appealed to many newly independent African nations.² The DPRK assisted the anti-apartheid and independence movements in South Africa and Namibia by running training camps for the ANC and SWAPO in Angola.³ The regime has remained active on the African continent with trade agreements, arms deals and illicit ivory trafficking, circumventing international sanctions.

North Korean state-owned design firm Mansudae Overseas Projects has developed twenty large-scale monuments across fourteen African countries between 1980 and 2014, ranging from colossal sculptures to museum complexes and memorial cemeteries. The projects exert the DPRK's soft power, earning significant foreign income and cultivating ideological and trade alignments with African governments. This paper explores these alignments through the case of Windhoek, Namibia, where Mansudae developed several monumental projects. These projects have unmistakable representational similarities to North Korea's post-war monuments. The paper will explore how Namibia's urban, social and political contexts, different from the DPRK, have influenced the monuments' public use and reception.

The Urban Histories of Pyongyang and Windhoek

Modern Pyongyang has been compared to Germania, Hitler's imagined future for Berlin,⁴ a bombastic cityscape designed by single authorship under authoritarian control, a totalitarian spatial expression of a nationalist political ideology. Windhoek, on the other hand, is a city shaped by successive colonial occupations, each of which cultivated an affinity to values and systems from different faraway geographies. These layered and overlapping allusions to distant cultures of political power have been encoded into the urban form and architectural aesthetics, and in the ways the urban environment is produced.

Pyongyang, founded in 1122 BC, was the seat of successive ancient Korean kingdoms and is one of Korea's oldest cities. The city was destroyed and rebuilt twice in recent history, during the Sino-Japanese war of 1894-95, rebuilt under Japanese occupation, and again by US aerial bombardment during the Korean War. The full-scale physical destruction of the city and its complete evacuation after the Korean War produced a tabula rasa in which the newly established DPRK, initially with enormous financial and material aid from its 'fraternal' socialist allies,⁵ could fashion a new capital city. This new city could be planned without obstruction from private property ownership or historic structure and function, resulting in a typical modernist superblock design with wide boulevards intended to separate residential districts rather than to accommodate traffic flow.⁶ Pyongyang was rebuilt as a reflection of socialism and the victorious self-determination representative of the new North Korean nation.

Present-day Pyongyang has approximately 3.25 million inhabitants, and is situated on the Taedong River, 109 kilometres inland from the Yellow Sea, separating the Korean Peninsula from China. The city's modernist urban form is ordered around visual and physical axes. The natural topography is employed as a stage-set, assembling symbolic and narrative connections between monumental sites, the most important of which are on elevated terrain. Many of the city's public buildings are situated along these urban axes. The city's most important visual axis extends from the Mansu Hill Grand Monument across the river to the Party Foundation Monument.⁷

Windhoek's urban form has been shaped and added to by successive colonial powers and imperial political ideologies. Archaeological evidence dates settlement at Windhoek to 5200 BC, likely by nomadic hunter-gatherers.⁸ Windhoek was founded in 1842 and in 1890, claimed as the capital of German South-West Africa. After World War I, South-West Africa was administered by the League of Nations and became a mandated territory administered by South Africa. Despite pressures by the United Nations from 1946 onwards, South Africa refused to cede control over South-West Africa. Windhoek was spatially transformed to reflect apartheid's social engineering ideologies, using modernist town planning. The city was racially segregated, using planning laws, systems and infrastructures to encode this into the urban form permanently. In 1990, after a protracted conflict, Namibia gained independence, and Sam Nujoma, of the South-West Africa People's Organisation (Swapo), was elected president. Namibia's political climate has been called "post-liberation democratic

authoritarianism,” a one-party dominated state with the former militant liberation movement intolerant of political challenges or views dissenting from official “patriotic history.”⁹ Present-day Windhoek has approximately 431,000 inhabitants.

With independence, Namibia’s project of crafting a new national identity began. Nujoma, having visited the DPRK several times before and after independence, considered the North Korean aesthetic suited to a non-Western expression of modernity, anti-colonial national autonomy and strong leadership,¹⁰ signalling a conscious departure from the colonial and apartheid-era landmarks and monuments that remain prominent in Windhoek. In examining their formal antecedents and distinctly North Korean ideas about urban space in Pyongyang, two Mansudae projects in Windhoek, the City Crown and Heroes’ Acre, will be discussed. The memorial projects in Windhoek, grounded in North Korean political ideology, develop new national symbols, historical narratives and identities while situated in a post-colonial urban form and stratified socio-political context.

Pyongyang’s Mansu Hill Grand Monument and Windhoek’s City Crown

Pyongyang and Windhoek have distinctly different urban forms. Their significance as capitals in relation to their country is also different. Pyongyang is a metonym for North Korea, central to its mythology and history.¹¹ Culture, nature and politics form a dialectic narrative central to constructing political ideologies such as the *Juche* philosophy.¹² Kim Il Sung stated that “Pyongyang must be a model for the whole country in all the ideological, technical and cultural spheres, so that it can give foreign visitors a complete picture of the development of our country.”¹³

Although unequivocally the largest and most modern city in Namibia, Windhoek does not claim a similar primacy in the national imagination, where identity politics are tied to, and contested by, non-urban land ownership. Windhoek’s pre-colonial settlement is poorly researched and rarely acknowledged, and the city’s colonial occupations have left behind multiple, often antagonistic and contradictory claims to the city. This colonial history relates unevenly to various geographic regions of the country, creating asymmetries in the capital city’s symbolic and cultural importance to different Namibian groups.

Both Pyongyang’s and Windhoek’s urban forms display the state’s exercise of power through memorial landscapes. In the DPRK state panopticism is exercised and

reproduced comprehensively by setting up clear spatial and social hierarchies ordering the individual and society and reproduced in urban space. The uniquely simultaneous construction of Pyongyang has allowed these spatial manifestations of state control to be constructed without compromise. This differs from Windhoek, where the city's piecemeal growth over time is rooted in different colonial planning ideologies, private property ownership and historic functions. Mansu Hill acts as the symbolic and panoptic centre of Pyongyang. The space links the city to the physical and spiritual presence of its author Kim Il Sung, “architect of the capital and choreographer of the fatherland’s landscape.”¹⁴

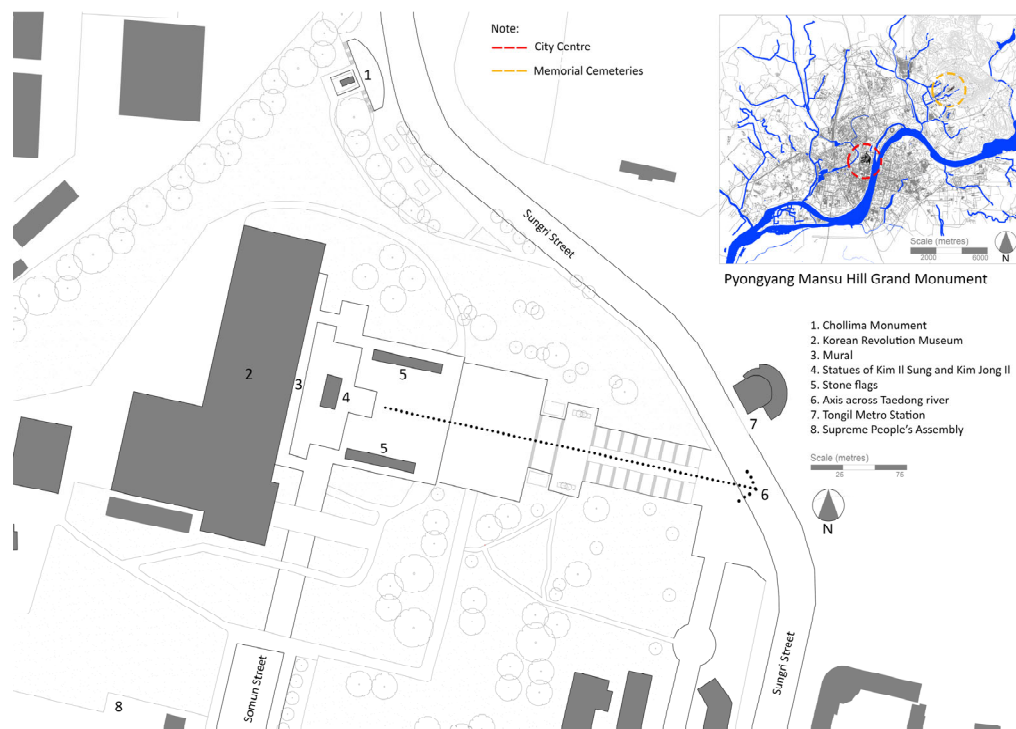


Figure 1. Pyongyang’s Mansu Hill Grand Monument
(Drawing by Stephanie Roland).

The Mansu Hill Grand Monument is a memorial complex at the northern corner of the central Chung-guyŏk district of Pyongyang. The site is the set-piece of central Pyongyang, book-ending Somun Street, a landscaped axis with features such as Hakdanggol Fountain Park and Mansudae Fountain Park, linking important public building complexes such as the Grand People’s Study House, Pyongyang Grand Theatre and the Supreme People’s Assembly (Figure 1, #8). Parallel Sungri Street, Korean for “victory,” is Pyongyang’s main traffic artery, along which public buildings like the Grand People’s Study House, the Mansudae Art Theatre, the Pyongyang

Schoolchildren’s Palace, Department Store No. 1, Children’s Department Store and showpiece residential tower blocks are located.¹⁵ North of Mansu Hill is the Chollima Monument, built in 1961 (Figure 1, #1). The 34 metre tall column bears the bronze sculptures of a man and a woman on the mythical winged horse of North Korean legend. The male worker holds the Red Letter issued by the Central Committee of the Worker’s Party of North Korea, while the peasant woman holds a sheaf of rice.¹⁶

The Grand Monument was built in 1972 for Kim Il Sung’s 60th birthday, featuring his bronze likeness, and was refurbished in 2011, adding a twin statue of his son Kim Jong Il (Figure 1, #4). The enormous Korean Revolution Museum (Figure 1, #2), with a 70 metre wide and 12.85 metre tall mosaic depicting Korea’s holy site, Mount Paektu, form the backdrop to the 22 metre tall bronze statues (Figure 1, #3). The statues are flanked by two sculpted stone flags with 5 metre tall sculptural clusters, one representing the anti-imperialist Japanese struggle and the other the socialist revolution,¹⁷ framing an expansive plaza (Figure 1, #5). The monumental flags “establish[.] the holy triad of leader, nation, and state.”¹⁸ Symmetrical landscaped stairs lead up to the plaza from Sungri Street, creating a visual axis across the Taedong river to the Workers’ Party Foundation Monument (Figure 1, #6). The site is accessible via Tongil Metro station (Figure 1, #7).



Figure 2. Windhoek’s City Crown
(Drawing by Stephanie Roland).

Windhoek's City Crown is a composition of the city's oldest buildings, a trio of centrally located administrative, religious and military buildings characteristic of the ideal German colonial city.¹⁹ Windhoek's 'colonial crown' was expanded from the 1892 stone Fort (Figure 2, #9), built on a hill for surveillance of the surrounding town and countryside, to include the 1910 neo-Romanesque Christchurch (Figure 2, #6) and the 1913 Parliament and its accompanying formal gardens (Figure 2, #2, #5). These buildings, adapting Wilhelminian architecture into a local vernacular, SWA Veranda Style,²⁰ reminded European residents and visitors of a typical provincial German town.²¹ The 'colonial crown' included a memorial, the 1912 *Reiterdenkmal* (Rider Statue), to German victory in the 1904–08 war. The war resulted in the genocide of the Herero and Nama people, and the *Reiterdenkmal* was erected on the site of the prisoner-of-war camps (Figure 2, approx #7). The statue has been interpreted as a symbol of settler culture and the genocide, simultaneously metonymic as the Herero name for Windhoek and iconic of tourism, highlighting Namibia's distinctive German heritage.²²

The *Reiterdenkmal* was moved in 2009 and then finally removed in 2013,²³ making way for the Mansudae commissioned 40 metre tall Independence Memorial Museum (IMM) at the intersection of Fidel Castro Street and Robert Mugabe Avenue (Figure 2, #8) – re-named after two other nominally socialist national independence leaders. The IMM shares an elevated platform, accessed by wide stairs from the street, with a bronze likeness of Sam Nujoma symbolically holding the constitution out to Independence Avenue and the city below (Figure 2, #7). The Genocide Memorial (Figure 2, #10) is in front of the Old Fort to highlight the German military's problematic legacy. The addition of these new memorials, executed in Mansudae's signature Socialist Realist aesthetic, has been referred to as "breaking the [colonial] crown,"²⁴ a bold assertion of nationalistic self and explicit breaking with the past,²⁵ an "obliteration of history,"²⁶ "accentuating a multi-layered built environment and memory narrative"²⁷ and re-inscribing Windhoek's "hill of power."²⁸

Windhoek's former State House, residence and office of the president (Figure 2, #1), was replaced by a Mansudae-designed and constructed complex in 2008, 5 kilometres from the city centre in the high-income suburban outskirts of Auasblick. The bunker-like 25 hectare State House complex, secured by a 2 kilometre long steel fence, was realised by expropriating about 50 privately owned residential properties.²⁹

North Korean Ideas about Urban Form in Windhoek's City Centre

The decision to add a new layer to Windhoek's City Crown, rather than creating a separate memorial site for independent Namibia, is informed by distinctly North Korean ideas about urban space, as illustrated in the earlier design of the Mansu Hill Grand Monument. Mansu Hill was the site of the colonial Japanese Heijō Shinto Shrine in the 1910s, which was burned down in 1945 after the Japanese surrender. The Chollima Monument, pre-dating Mansu Hill, transforms the mythical winged Chollima into a symbol of the reconstruction of society by the Workers' Party after Japanese occupation.³⁰ Despite the city's spatial destruction, the centrepiece of Pyongyang is deliberately anchored in symbols of North Korean history and culture pre-dating socialism.

Similarly, Windhoek's independent memorials, rather than creating a new set-piece for the city along Independence Avenue, sit in deliberate spatial and aesthetic tension with colonial landmarks. Following the DPRK's example of glorifying a state leader as a metonym for a nation and its independence, the towering Nujoma Statue is the centrepiece of the new City Crown, replacing the *Reiterdenkmal*, which stood on the hill for 102 years. Nujoma is referred to as the "father of the nation," echoing descriptions of Kim Il-Sung.³¹ The site's historical significance as the location of the genocide concentration camps seems an afterthought. The smaller genocide memorial, a life-size bronze sculpture of a man and a woman breaking free from the shackles of colonialism, is mounted on a simple stone plinth without a formal access path on the sloping unkempt ground leading up to the Old Fort.

Windhoek's choice of site and genocide memorial, like Pyongyang's Chollima Monument, anchors Swapo's narrative of leading the liberation struggle against South African occupation with an earlier culture and history of resistance to German colonialism. The appropriateness of the memorial has been questioned, including the figures' victorious stance and strong physiques,³² imitating its North Korean and Soviet socialist-realist antecedents, neither befitting a site of mourning nor resembling concentration camp inmates. The memorial's inscription, a line of the national anthem, "their blood waters our freedom," is associated with Swapo and the liberation struggle but does not mention the genocide.³³ Some argue that the current Namibian government, a majority of which is made up of people who cannot trace their ancestry to the events of the genocide, sees no significance in this history, choosing to rewrite this part of Windhoek's history to favour Swapo's liberation struggle narrative instead.³⁴

Mansudae's additions to Windhoek's City Crown fit within an older lineage of constructing urban space in Windhoek, the colonial logic of importing a foreign architectural aesthetic and attendant symbolism rather than acknowledging local culture, materials and building expertise. The relocation of State House from its former location opposite parliament to a highly secured site in the suburbs, forcibly cleared of neighbouring properties, spatially dislocates the presidency both from the citizenry and the governing structures of a democratic state.

Pyongyang's National Martyrs Cemetery and Windhoek's Heroes' Acre

The National Martyrs' Cemetery in Pyongyang was built in 1975 to commemorate the individuals who fought against the Japanese occupation of Korea. The National Martyrs' Cemetery occupies 30 hectares on the Chujak Peak of Mount Taesong, 12 kilometres northeast of Mansu Hill. Views from the cemetery extend to the landmark Ryugyong Hotel 12 kilometres southwest. The cemetery is accessed by a monumental 'Korean style' entrance gate (Figure 3, #P1), over 300 steps (Figure 3, #P2) up the landscaped hillside. At the top of the stairs is a wide stone avenue (Figure 3, #P3) flanked by sculptural groups of soldiers (Figure 3, #P4) and a placard in Kim-II Sung's handwriting (Figure 3, #P5). Terminating the stone avenue is a sloped granite pedestal with a large bronze medallion and wreath motif (Figure 3, #P6), the spatial gateway to the sacred ground of the cemetery. Behind this pedestal is the symmetrically terraced cemetery (Figure 3, #P7), ending in a central row of graves set against a sculpture of a large red granite flag (Figure 3, #P8/9). The graves are copper busts on marble pedestals, and the central row at the apex of the cemetery holds members of Kim II Sung's family.

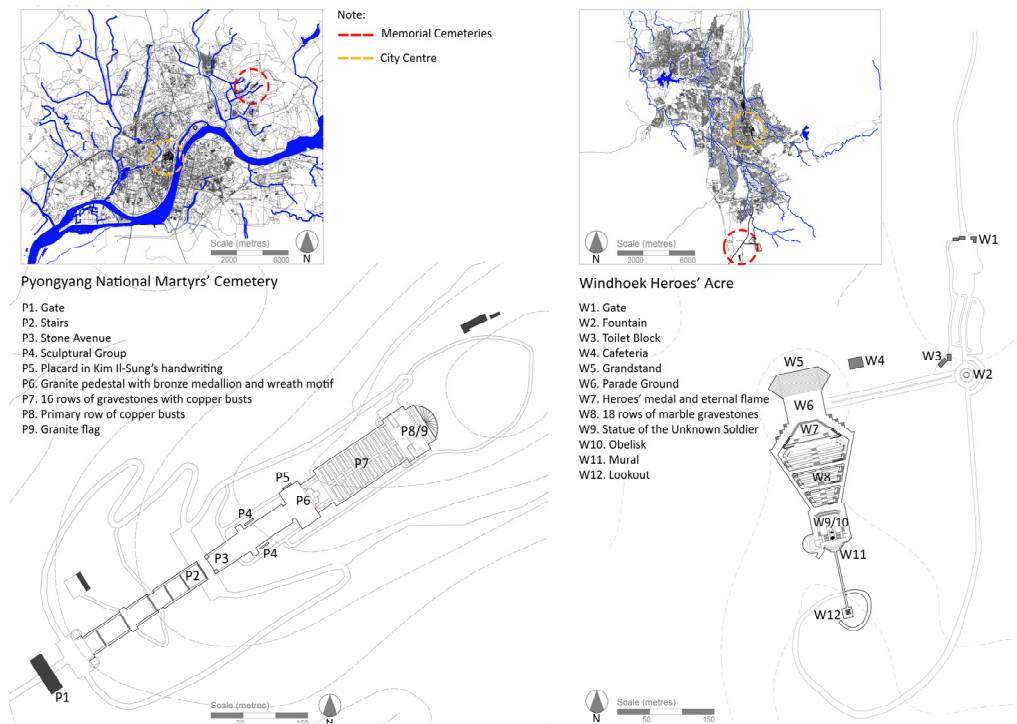


Figure 3. Pyongyang National Martyrs' Cemetery and Windhoek Heroes' Acre (Drawings by Stephanie Roland).

Windhoek's Heroes' Acre, built in 2002, is located approximately 10 kilometres south of the city centre. This polygon-shaped war memorial occupies a sloping hillside like Pyongyang's Martyr's cemetery and is similarly accessed through a monumental entrance gate (Figure 3, #W1). A fountain with a carved sculptural column (Figure 3, #W2) directs movement to the memorial obliquely across a paved parade ground (Figure 3, #W6) with a stepped grandstand facing the cemetery (Figure 3, #W5). Bordering the plaza, the Heroes' Medal and eternal flame (Figure 3, #W7) replicate Pyongyang's symbolic spatial gateway to the cemetery (Figure 3, #P6). The Heroes' Medal is a new symbol for Namibia, derived from Pyongyang's bronze medallion, dedicated to all Namibians who sacrificed their lives for independence.³⁵ Rows of memorial tombstones (Figure 3, #W8) symmetrically flank stairs leading up to a tall obelisk clad in white marble visible from Windhoek's city centre, in front of which is the bronze statue of "the unknown soldier" (Figure 3, #W9/10). The two elements are surrounded by a curved relief depicting Namibia's freedom struggle from colonial occupation (Figure 3, #W11).

Heroes' Acre and Constructing a Political Lineage

Heroes' Acre differs from Pyongyang's in including a grandstand for 5000 people, symbolically, if passively, incorporating a public audience. The monument's location outside Windhoek places it beyond the reach of most city residents who live in Windhoek's northeast and do not own private motorcars. Swapo supporters are typically bussed in for ceremonial events, ensuring commemorations at Heroes' Acre remain exclusive and laudatory.

Heroes' Acre spatially replicates many of the elements of Martyrs' Cemetery. The "unknown soldier" bears an uncanny resemblance to Sam Nujoma, its plinth inscribed in the former president's handwriting, opaquely placing him at the apex of the memorial. Pyongyang's Martyrs' Cemetery puts the Kim family in prime position, developing the Kims' political narrative of a familial lineage of rulers. The first seven interments at Heroes' Acre were of colonial resistance leaders,³⁶ similar to the City Crown in grounding Swapo's narrative of resistance in earlier history. Most of those subsequently interred at Heroes' Acre have been Swapo politicians. Their arrangement at Heroes' Acre, below the "unknown" soldier, produces independent Namibia's political aristocracy. The burial space of Heroes' Acre is larger than Pyongyang's Martyrs' Cemetery, with many of its 174 tombs unoccupied, which indicates that the project of constructing Swapo's political lineage has only just begun.

Public Reception and Contestation of Mansudae's Memorials in Windhoek

The Nujoma Statue at Windhoek's City Crown has recently become the favoured backdrop to a series of peaceful protests by youth and gender rights activists calling for reforms to Namibian society on issues including sexual and gender-based violence, LGBTQIA+ rights, police brutality, colonialism, inequality and racism. Protest marches in Windhoek often travel along Independence Avenue, ending by delivering petitions to parliament. In 2020, the peaceful Shut It All Down protest, one of the largest post-independence youth protests, was attacked by police with tear-gas, batons and rubber bullets outside the parliament gardens.³⁷ Immediately afterward, a razor-wire fence was erected around the gardens, effectively removing public access to the city's oldest and best-maintained public park and parliament. Removing these spaces from the public's constitutionally enshrined right to protest has inadvertently contributed to the Nujoma Statue becoming a locus for protests. The statue has become a deliberate backdrop for youth protests over the patriarchal, moralistic, homophobic and historically revisionist stance of the Swapo government. Mansudae's monumental and

imposing works, not intended for reciprocal engagement with the public, have been appropriated in this instance by the exercise of the democratic rights of Namibian citizens.



Figure 4: LGBTQIA+ rights protest 2021
(Photograph by Nicola Brandt, with permission).

Conclusion

Although Pyongyang and Windhoek have very different urban forms, Windhoek's colonially rooted tradition of importing an architectural aesthetic and symbolism has been extended by the addition of Mansudae's works to the City Crown. Taking their cue from the Kim family's practice of memorialising their familial lineage, these new monuments glorify Swapo's liberation struggle and actively produce a new political aristocracy for Namibia. These new works, like their North Korean socialist antecedents, also anchor Swapo's historical narrative in local culture and history, pre-dating the movement and its political ideology.

Heroes' Acre, suited to Namibian traditions of grounding claims to belonging and land through the symbolic burial of leaders,³⁸ successfully echoes Pyongyang's Martyrs' Cemetery in creating a memorial space not intended for public use. The monument complex, located far from the city's residents, further minimises the chances of spontaneous democratic interaction through its admissions fees and armed guards patrolling the perimeter. The relocation of the State House from the city centre to the

suburban outskirts of Windhoek, also by Mansudae, and the recent fencing-off of parliament and parliament gardens, is indicative of the Namibian government's tendency of discouraging civic engagement and dissent by restricting public access to space. Unlike the DPRK, Namibia has enshrined democratic citizens' rights in its constitution, and Mansudae's additions to Windhoek's City Crown, contrary to their progenitors, have been appropriate as spaces of democratic expression.

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- ³³ Becker, "Changing Urbanscapes."
- ³⁴ Gewald, "From the Old Location to Bishops Hill," 271.
- ³⁵ Kirkwood, *Postcolonial Architecture*, 21.
- ³⁶ Tycho van der Hoog, *Monuments of Power: The North Korean Origin of Nationalist Monuments in Namibia and Zimbabwe* (Leiden: African Studies Centre, 2019).
- ³⁷ Hildegard Titus, Nicola Brandt and Frances Whorrall-Campbell, "The Right to Protest: Intersectional Activism in Namibia," *Conversations Across Place: Reckoning with an Entangled World*, vol. 1 (Berlin: The Green Box, 2021), 166-86.
- ³⁸ John T Friedman, "Making Politics, Making History: Chiefship and the Post-Apartheid State in Namibia," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 31, no. 1 (2005): 23-51.